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An Investigation of Norm of Belief's Proper Formulation*

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Abstract

That falsity is a defect in belief can be captured with a prohibitive norm holding that truth is the necessary condition for permissibility of belief. Furthermore, such a formulation avoids the difficulties encountered in earlier literature that offered prescriptive norms. The normativity of belief thesis is widely discussed in the literature. I criticise bi-conditional formulation of the norm of the normativity of belief thesis which holds that truth is both the necessary and sufficient condition for the permissibility of belief formation. I argue that the part which holds that truth is the sufficient condition for the permissibility of belief formation is redundant. The argument follows from clarifying the key ideas at stake in the normativity of belief thesis, namely, that false belief is a defect and that the normativity thesis is supposed to distinguish the concept of belief from other cognitive attitudes and the slogan that belief aims at truth.

Keywords: belief, normativity, prohibitive, prescriptive, constitutive, norm, permissible

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Introduction

The normativity of belief thesis is widely discussed in the literature (Boghossian 2003, 2005; Engel 2001; Gibbard 2003, 2005; Shah 2003, 2006; Shah and Velleman 2005; Wedgwood 2002). The thesis holds that belief formation is constrained by a truth norm; it posits a normative relation between belief formation and the truth value of what is believed (see for example Boghossian 2005: 213). There is still a severe philosophical debate about how best to formulate the norm of belief, but a key intuition that most normativists about belief want to endorse has been that the norm captures the idea that *false belief is a defect* (see my paper Kalantari & Luntley 2013 in this regard). The idea that false belief is a defect is endorsed in recent contributions (kalantari & Luntley 2013; Raleigh 2013; Whiting 2010, forthcoming). Apart from the idea that false belief is a defect, there are two further intuitions that are common in the literature regarding the thesis. The second intuition is the idea that the claim that belief formation is constrained by the norm of belief is what distinguishes belief from the other cognitive attitudes (see for example Shah and Velleman 2005: 497, 498). The third intuition concerns the truth aim of belief: the normativity thesis is often thought to capture the slogan that belief aims at truth (Boghossian 2003, 2005; Shah 2003, 2006; Shah and Velleman 2005). I provide clarification of the intuitions below, and then try to argue for a norm of belief which I suppose is the proper one.

Truth is merely the necessary condition for the permissibility of belief

That falsity is a defect in belief can be captured with a prohibitive norm holding that truth is the necessary condition for permissibility of belief. Furthermore, such a formulation avoids the difficulties encountered in earlier literature that offered prescriptive norms (see kalantari & Luntley 2013 for details). So, the first key intuition can be captured with the prohibitive norm:

(N1) For any S, p : it is permissible to believe that p , only if p .

The norm is prohibitive. If p is false, it is not permissible (i.e. one ought not) to believe that p .

Notwithstanding the acceptance of the idea expressed in (N1), recent accounts of the normativity of belief, while acknowledging the idea that the norm is prohibitive, persist in employing a bi-conditional formulation in which a sufficient condition is added to (N1) (see for example Raleigh 2013; Whiting 2010, forthcoming). The idea suggests the norm of belief is (N1) plus a sufficient condition for the permissibility of belief, namely:

(N2): For any S, p : it is permissible to believe that p if p .

It is, however, not clear that over and above (N1) there is any need for (N2) as part of the norm of belief. I will argue that (N2) is redundant. It fails to address any of the three key intuitions about the normativity of belief. To clarify the idea I start with a key idea about the scope of the normativity of belief thesis.

Boghossian (2005) puts the normativity thesis as follows: it is constitutive of understanding belief attribution that belief formation is subject to the norm of belief; understanding that an attitude ascription is one of belief is to understand that the attitude is subject to the norm of belief (2005: 212). Understanding a belief attribution requires understanding the concept of belief. The normativity of belief thesis holds that a condition for grasping the concept of belief, that is, a condition for conceiving of the attributed attitude as belief, is to understand that the attitude is constrained by the truth norm. The key point to Boghossian's account is that it is attitudes conceived *as* belief that are subject to normative constraint, it is not belief as such. Shah and Velleman (2005) echo this claim when they say conceiving of an attitude as a belief entails applying to it the norm of belief (2005: 497). The scope of the normativity of belief for these normativists is that the norm applies to attitudes conceived as belief; the normativity arises as a constraint on what it is to understand something as a belief.

Acknowledging the scope of the normativity thesis explains the second key intuition, for it distinguishes the concept of belief from the concepts of other cognitive attitudes, for example, assumption (Shah and Velleman 2005: 497, 498). While it is constitutive of grasp of the concept of belief that belief formation is subject to the truth norm, this is not the case for the other cognitive attitudes. Non cognitive attitudes are not, plausibly, subject to normative constraint. For example there are no constraints on what constitutes the correctness of forming assumption or imagination. Furthermore, according to Boghossian (2003, 2005) as well as Shah and Velleman (2005), the normativity that is constitutive of grasp of the concept of belief is supposed to capture the slogan that belief aims at truth. These philosophers, in order to capture the slogan that belief aims at truth, have suggested prescriptive accounts of the norm of belief. There are, however well-known problems with such norms (see Bykvits and Hattiangadi 2007) including the point that such norms systematically fail to capture the key intuition that falsity is a defect. There is a case therefore, for abandoning the third intuition in favour of the first and thereby endorsing a prohibitive rather than prescriptive account of the norm (reference deleted for anonymity)¹.

Suppose then we endorse a prohibitive norm. The question now is should it be the necessary condition norm (N1), or a biconditional conjoining (N1) and (N2)? It might seem that (N2) is unobjectionable, for if *p* is true then surely it is permissible to believe that *p*, but that thought fails to address the following question: does (N2) capture any of the key intuitions one finds in this debate? I suggest it fails to capture any of them.

First, (N2) does not capture the idea that false belief is a defect. (N2) holds that if *p* is true then it is permissible to believe that *p*. It does not deliver a prohibitive norm according to which we ought not to believe *p* when *p* is false. Clearly, as a sufficient condition on belief formation, (N2) cannot address the defect case. The defect situation is covered by (N1). So, with respect to the first key intuition, (N2) is redundant.

Second, (N2) does not help distinguish the concept of belief from the concepts of other cognitive attitudes. If *p* is true then, according to (N2), it is permissible to believe that *p*. But this is hardly what that distinguishes the concept of belief from the concepts of the other cognitive attitudes. Consider the case of assumption. If *p* is true, it is permissible to assume that *p*. Or consider imagination: if *p* is true, it is permissible to imagine *p*. But this means that the sufficient condition formulation, (N2), does not differentiate the concept of belief from that of assumption or imagination. Indeed, the fact that (N2) does not deliver the second key intuition about normative shows how empty and innocuous (N2) is, for it places no constraint on any of these attitudes

Third, suppose for the sake of argument we endorse the third intuition that belief aims at truth and that the normativity thesis should capture this aim. One then might want to claim that (N2) contributes to capture the alleged truth aim of belief. The claim is a mistake as the alleged truth aim, according to its defenders (e.g. Shah and Velleman 2005), is supposed to distinguish the concept of belief from the concepts of the other cognitive attitudes. The idea plus the idea that (N2) does not help distinguish the concept of belief from the concepts of other cognitive attitudes imply that (N2) fails to capture the alleged truth aim of belief.

I conclude therefore that (N2) is redundant. If we want a prohibitive formulation of the normativity of belief thesis, (N1) will suffice.

One might respond to the above case against (N2) by claiming that although innocuous and redundant, it is still true that if *p* is true then it is permissible to believe that *p*. There is, therefore, no harm in providing the biconditional account of the normativity thesis.

This criticism, however, fails to acknowledge the point about the scope of the normativity thesis. The thesis does not hold that belief as such is normatively constrained; it holds that attitudes conceived as belief are normatively constrained. The constraint follows from what is constitutive of grasp of the concept of belief. That something is a norm governing belief follows from what is constitutive of grasp of the concept. It is, of course, an analytic implication of

p is true

that

one is permitted to believe that p.

But the idea of the normativity of belief is that the norm is implied by what is constitutive of grasp of the concept of belief. The normativity of belief thesis is implied by what is constitutive of grasp of belief rather than analytic implication, and the former is a stricter condition rather than the latter (Boghossian 2003: 37, 38). That dogs bark, analytically implies that dogs bark or 2 is even. But dogs bark or 2 is even is not constitutive of grasp of the concept that dogs bark.

(N2) does not have any contribution to make in capturing what is constitutive of grasp of the concept of belief. (N2) cannot capture the idea that false belief is defect. Even if we thought belief aimed at truth, (N2) could not capture the slogan, and it cannot distinguish the concept of belief from the concepts of other cognitive attitudes. Thus (N2) is redundant; that is, the norm of the normativity of belief thesis holds that p's truth is *merely* the necessary condition for the permissibility of believing that p.

Conclusion

I claimed that truth is *merely* the necessary condition for the permissibility of belief formation. In order to substantiate the claim, I argued that the idea that truth is the sufficient condition for the permissibility of belief formation, on the contrary of the idea that truth is the necessary condition for the permissibility of belief formation, is redundant as it fails to capture any of the three main intuitions in the literature regarding the normativity of belief thesis. That is to say, the former idea (first) fails to capture the idea that false belief is a defect, (second) it fails to distinguish between the concept of belief and the concept of the other cognitive attitudes, (third) it fails to capture the alleged idea that belief aims at truth.

Notes:

1. Dealing with the point that prohibitive norms do not capture the alleged truth aim of belief is extraneous to the purpose of this paper. For more details on this see (reference deleted for anonymity).

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